

# From Apartheid South Africa to Socialist Budapest and Back: Communism, Race, and Cold War Journeys

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## Abstract

This article reveals the communist transnational infrastructure that connected South African communists with socialist regimes in the early 1950s. Before the establishment of a global anti-apartheid movement after Sharpeville, this network enabled the circulation of people and ideas outward from South Africa. Communist education and institutions in the country opened up avenues for protest, mobility and community for political dissidents. When state persecution of communists increased in 1948, activists used this infrastructure to escape the country, procure employment or continue their political engagement abroad. I demonstrate this by tracing the journey of the South African communists Pauline Podbrey and H.A. Naidoo who were forced to leave the country in 1951 due to their political activity against the regime as well as apartheid legislation that outlawed interracial marriages such as theirs. Once in Britain, the couple were sent by the British *Communist Party* to Hungary to participate in the Cold War battle over hearts and minds as radio broadcasters. This case-study demonstrates how the intersection of Cold War politics, apartheid and race shaped the escape routes and future trajectories of communist anti-apartheid activists. Reconstructing the couple's itineraries between dissent and disillusionment, it questions the dominant post-apartheid narrative of the struggle as a heroic tale of survival and triumph, and highlights the fragmentation and failure of political lives.

## Introduction

In 1942 Pauline Podbrey, a young Jewish communist from Durban, South Africa met H.A. Naidoo, a charismatic trade unionist of Indian descent at a political meeting in town (Podbrey 1993: 33). The two were members of the *Communist Party of South African* (CPSA) and labour activists. Their passion for the cause was soon accompanied by a romantic relationship. Their romance, however, faced a double challenge. From the 1940s, communists encountered discriminatory structures and prosecution because of their political activity. Anti-miscegenation laws heaped further obstacles to their private lives. Anti-communist and anti-miscegenation sentiments intensified when the *National Party* (NP) came to power in 1948. The regime led by the NP instantiated apartheid, legislated against interracial marriage, and increased its attack on the CPSA, where Podbrey and Naidoo were prominent figures.

In these circumstances, the Naidoo family urgently needed to flee South Africa. This, however, was hard to execute: in November 1946, following a strike of African mineworkers in August that year, Naidoo and seven other members of the Central Committee of CPSA were charged with sedition. The government reopened the case in July 1947 and arrested Naidoo (*The Guardian* 1947; *The Guardian* 1948a). Although these charges were withdrawn in October 1948 (*The Guardian* 1948b), state prosecution continued. The 1950 *Suppression of Communism Act* led to the disbanding of the CPSA. Under the provisions of the act, Naidoo was named a communist and his freedom of movement was restricted to Durban, sixteen hundred kilometres away from Cape Town, where he had been living with Podbrey and their two daughters (Podbrey 1993: 141). The family was denied passports and thus the legal route to exit. They escaped to London in 1951, where comrades from the *Communist Party of Great Britain* (CPGB) offered them to move to Hungary to work as broadcasters in the English service section of *Radio Budapest* (Podbrey 1993: 157). Once there, they found that real socialism in Budapest diverged significantly from their earlier Marxist education, their union work, and their imaginings of life in a socialist paradise. They returned to London three years later, disillusioned, disheartened and no longer Party members (Podbrey 1993: 157–93). This case-study will contribute to recent scholarship questioning the dominant post-apartheid narrative of the struggle as a celebratory personal tale of “survival, triumph and exemplariness” modelled after Nelson Mandela’s

autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (Rassool 2016: 196). Highlighting failure and the fall into obscurity that awaits many activists adds to our understanding of activism and its personal consequences.

To no lesser extent, the paper is attentive to the importance of the early transnational dimensions of South African anti-apartheid activism. Historian Rob Skinner argued recently that the South African experience in the last two centuries has been a transnational one. It has been inscribed by people, processes and projects that “thrived in between, across and through polities and societies” (Skinner 2017: 2). Skinner identifies three networks that shaped the transnational experience: the British Imperial network, the Indian Ocean and East Africa (Skinner 2017: 3-4), but he does not consider the place of the Soviet Unions and its networks and connections in his schema. Yet Podbrey and Naidoo’s journey demonstrates the prominence of this nexus for South Africa during the twentieth century. It reveals the communist transnational infrastructure that connected South African communists with socialist regimes in the early 1950s, prior to the establishment of a global anti-apartheid movement.

The convergence of Cold war politics, apartheid and race determined the escape routes and future trajectories of Podbrey and Naidoo. In addition to how race and religion had marked their social, economic and political status in South Africa, Podbrey and Naidoo were shaped by Communist ideology, and their membership in the CPSA. For labour activists in the period, the institutions and networks of the *Communist Party* in South Africa and abroad offered mobility, meaning, and community. Podbrey and Naidoo exploited these resources, their credentials as prominent Party members in South Africa, and Naidoo’s reputation as a public speaker, to leave South Africa against the will of the state and to negotiate a new space for themselves in the Communist universe. This included positions in *Radio Budapest*, at the centre of the Cold War battle over hearts and minds. Once the couple gave up this post and returned to England, they were no longer welcome in Communist circles in Britain. They were shunned by English and South African communists who refused to engage with dissidents. (Podbrey 1993: 196–98). They were marginalized by this network and ceased to work as activists. Consequently, their contribution to the struggle against apartheid receded to the margins of the canonical memory of the period.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sociologist Jonathan Hyslop argues that the post-apartheid, ANC-centered memory of the struggle threatens “the whole historical enterprise in South Africa” (Hyslop 2010, 104).

Autobiographical texts are well-suited to put these experiences of marginalization centre-stage. Writing about military regimes in South America, author and journalist Lawrence Weschler claimed that in oppressive regimes, “[h]istory ... is a battle over who gets to say ‘I’” (Weschler 1998: 237). During apartheid, language functioned similarly as a tool of violence and control. “The definition of terms, such as “communism” and “terrorism,” explains Paul Gready, “were rewritten to the extent that they became a nonsense” (Gready 2003: 8). Under the 1950 *Suppression of Communism Act* the government closed institutions such as such as reading groups and printing houses which they believed created and circulated competing facts (*Suppression of Communism Act* 1950). In this environment, to write in the autobiographical mode, a genre dedicated to claiming the power of “I,” was a political act (Gready 2003: 9; Ngoshi 2013: 126). Autobiography was perceived as an appropriate mode to criticize apartheid, and flourished under it (Rassool 2016; Gready 2003; Unterhalter 2000; Hyslop 2010).

Podbrey and Naidoo's saga is not unknown. Mark Israel described their exit from South Africa as an early example of a “great escape” narrative characteristic of other anti-apartheid memoirs (Israel 1999: 27). Elsewhere, it has been subsumed under narratives of South African Jewish or Communist activists (Robins 1997; Robins 1998; Alexander 2000). Scholars have also deployed their trajectory to shed light on the origins of the early trade union movement in South Africa or to construct the social histories of Durban and Cape Town (Alexander 2000; Bickford-Smith, Worden, and van Heyningen 1999). These accounts, however, provide limited insights into the contradictions and dilemmas the couple faced and neglect the importance of their stay in Budapest and its aftermath. Instead of retracing existing narratives, this article proposes to follow Podbrey and Naidoo's journey from South Africa to London to Budapest, back to London, and finally, to Cape Town. Through extending the analysis beyond one location or one time period, it is possible to reckon with the fragmentary, fractured and failure-prone tendencies of activist life. The structure of the journey is particularly suited to illustrate this, as every location along the way helps to expose the contingency of political and private alliances, and the importance of institutional backing and recognition. Reconstructing the couple's itineraries also shows the personal price paid for protest, and for dissenting from the official party line.

Following these interventions, I position autobiographical texts at the centre of this article. I use Podbrey's memoir published in 1993, print and filmed interviews of her, and oral interviews I conducted with family members to analyse her physical and intellectual itineraries. Naidoo's paper trail is substantially smaller. His untimely death in 1971, and bouts of depression during his last decades (Podbrey 2017), may explain the absence of written or recorded reflections on his life. A biography of Naidoo, however, is nestled within Podbrey's memoir. This inclusion is Podbrey's attempt to restore herself, Naidoo, and their circle of comrades to the official memory of modern South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

### **South Africa 1940-1951**

The *Communist Party of South Africa* was established on July 30, 1921 in Cape Town. Its beginnings were humble and non-diverse: it had 175 members, the majority of which were white (Drew 2009: 831). South Africa's working class was divided along racial lines: a minority of skilled, better paid and organized white labour, and a growing African, male, migrant, non-unionized proletariat (Drew 2009: 831–32). The 1922 Rand Revolt led by white workers brought these divisions to the forefront. It was carried out by armed, white workers who protested the state's intention to replace them with cheap African labour. Anti-black and Afrikaner nationalist rhetoric of the strikers alienated African organizations such as the *African National Congress* (ANC) (Drew 2009: 832). During the strike, the CPSA privileged the claims of white workers and neglected those made by the black proletariat. After the strike was brutally crushed and its leadership co-opted by the state, the CPSA turned to the organization and recruitment of black workers. Consequently, many white workers left the CPSA, and the demographics of its leaders and members had changed significantly. In 1928, the CPSA claimed to have 1,750 members, including 1,600 Africans (Drew 2009: 832).

During this period, the Comintern began placing greater emphasis on its South African branch, following its growing interest in colonialism (Filatova 2012: 511). The Comintern had adopted a resolution that prioritized an "independent Native Republic" over industrial labour struggles and interracial class unity. The skirmishes over the direction of the CPSA

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<sup>2</sup> Many activists who wrote memoirs during apartheid and in the transition period to democracy shared this motivation (Unterhalter 2000: 159).

brought about in-fighting and the ousting of many of the first generation communists and new black recruits (Drew 2009: 832). From a membership of 3,000 in 1929, membership shrank to 60 by 1932 (Sandwith 2013: 4).

In 1935, the Comintern's leadership ordered the CPSA to work with and within trade unions (Filatova 2012: 513). This raised the CPSA's visibility and popularity (Dubow 2005: 4). The Comintern's global anti-fascist wartime strategy focused on building bridges between workers, peasants and the *Communist Party*. In South Africa, this translated into attempts to construct alliances that transcended the colour line, in the hope of attracting black and coloured members (Drew 1991: 59).<sup>3</sup> In June 1944, the CPSA launched a recruitment campaign with the goal of adding 1,000 new members. Naidoo, as the Acting Secretary of the CPSA, explained that it was in the interest of the South African working class as a whole to fight fascism, and to anticipate the post-war moment as a large and energized movement (*The Guardian* 1944c). Russia's role in the war against fascism improved the CPSA's reputation among white workers and soldiers (Ellis 2014: 4). The membership of the CPSA grew, and the "cultural discourse of the Communist Left, and the Party itself, enjoyed a fleeting legitimacy" (Sandwith 2013: 2). The expansion, however, was mainly among white South Africans, while Indian and African members worked in their separate associations (Raman 2005: 234–35).

The Party's political gains in the post-war era threatened the South African regime, and it acted swiftly against it. On 12 August 1946 the *African Mine Workers Union* called for a strike to protest working conditions. It ended with police suppression and the arrest of over 1,000 individuals – mostly communists and trade unionists. Naidoo and more than fifty Party members and activists were charged for sedition. The Attorney-General explained that the sedition element "flowed ... from the basic principles of Communism" (*The Guardian* 1948a). He maintained that the strike was rigged by the Johannesburg District Committee of the Party to advance the Communist cause – not that of the miners (*The Guardian* 1948a). Although the case was dismissed in May 1948 (*The Guardian* 1948b), the state was on the alert. Pressure mounted in 1950 with the *Suppression of Communism Act* that declared the CPSA unlawful. The Act defined Communism in such broad strokes that it equated a wide array of expressions of political dissent

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<sup>3</sup> In South Africa the term refers to a multiracial ethnic group native to Southern Africa who have ancestry from various populations in the region.

with it (Clark/Worger 2013: 58). In the wake of this massive repression, a wave of activists left the country in both legal and illegal ways, and the struggle against apartheid entered a period of hiatus.

### **Communist Contact Zones**

It was under contingent historical and political circumstances that the Communist transnational network became relevant for Podbrey and Naidoo. In the late 1930s, rapid urbanization and industrialization had created a vibrant black urban culture. Fears of a supposed “takeover” of the cities by blacks, however, narrowed spaces where individuals from all races could meet (Dubow 2014: 5). Still, some sites of urban modernity doubled as locales of encounter. Offices and factories, union meetings, and universities, house parties in wealthy white suburbs or in impoverished black homes served as contact zones where ties of friendship and affection were formed. Communist political assemblies, study groups, book and film clubs functioned effectively in this manner (Sandwith 2013: 7). In addition to providing a space for interracial fraternization, the ideology preached in such settings encouraged individuals to transcend social norms and legal restrictions. In Durban, the CPSA was the only organization where members of all races “could meet, interact, and debate on equal terms” (Soske 2017: 81). Naidoo enrolled in a Marxist-Leninist reading group and Podbrey joined the *Left Book Club*, the *Liberal Study Group*, the CPSA and the trade unions (Robins 1997: 51).

This was the context in which Podbrey (born Pessel Podbrez), originally from the Lithuanian Jewish *Shtetl* Malat, met H.A. Naidoo, a Durban-born descendant of indentured labourers who had come to South Africa from India. The two first encountered each other when Podbrey was a teenager. A man she had met on the beach brought her to a communist gathering in the Indian district in town. In her memoir, Podbrey described the room which was lit by

[...] one fly-spattered, unshaded bulb which left most of the room in shadow, making it hard to identify the black and brown men occupying the wooden benches. These were men exhausted by their labours ... [T]hey sat with shoulders hunched, elbows on knees and heads cradled in their hands (Podbrey 1993: 33).

The space, at once a scene of despair, hardship, and fantasy, was illuminated by Naidoo's presence: the "handsomest man" Podbrey had ever met. Podbrey marvelled at his "easy grace," and physique. She noted his "spotless" clothes and how they contrasted with the faded clothes of those around him. Podbrey admired the fact that Naidoo was "a black man who had no need of postures or assertions in his dealings with any group" (Podbrey 1993: 33).

Podbrey's gaze cast Naidoo as an object of desire. Her description reveals a hierarchy of power based on race: Podbrey's white skin enabled her to transgress and move between the city's streets, from white to Indian areas. In contrast to her mobility, the movements of the Africans at the meeting were regulated by the Pass System that made Africans' entry into cities and towns conditional on a signed certificate of employment. Naidoo's own appeal stemmed from his ability to use his political platform to distinguish himself from the crowd. The Communist creed Naidoo preached and the institution that stood behind him, bestowed upon him a degree of power beyond that which the state allocated his social group. The power field that Naidoo created in the intimacy of the assembly was possible given the near absence of white onlookers and because of the higher place of Indians in the South African hierarchy of race.

Both Podbrey's and Naidoo's activism sprang from their embodied experience of political marginalization. As individuals of Jewish and Indian descent their identity and political awareness were shaped by the racial legislation of the state and by the response of their communities to it. Decades before apartheid became official state policy in 1948, a system of racial economic exploitation and white political dominance had already taken shape. The *Natives Land Act* of 1913 limited Africans, then 80 per cent of the population, to 13 per cent of the land. The Act left African men landless and forced them into waged labour on white farms or in the mines (Ngcobo 2012: 1). The Pass laws that controlled their mobility underpinned "a system of cheap labour and humiliating subjugation" (Shear 2013: 207) that applied to both men and women, though in different ways. Legislation in the decades leading up to 1948 further decreased mobility, residency and property rights and the franchise of Africans and Indians. Bills aimed at immigration from India were passed in the 1920s and early 1930s. In addition, the 1930 *Quota Act* denied Eastern European Jews entrance to South Africa and was followed by the even more restrictive 1937 *Aliens Bill*.



The regulation of desire by the state was the intimate embodiment of the pre-apartheid ideal of separateness. The 1927 *Immorality Act* prohibited intercourse “out of wedlock” between white and “native” men and women and stipulated long sentences of imprisonment as punishment (Martens 2007: 224). The issue of ‘mixed’ marriages dominated the public discourse – even though the number of interracial marriages was minuscule (Hyslop 1995: 65). Between 1930 and 1950 these numbers declined from 9.5 per 1000 to 2.8 per 1000 (Blair 2003: 587). Between 1943 and 1946, when Podbrey and Naidoo married, “fewer than 100 mixed marriages per year took place against an annual total of almost 30,000 marriages of white couples” (Blair 2003: 607). Nonetheless, the 1949 *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* was the first significant piece of apartheid legislation. The 1950 *Immorality Act* that followed went even further and prohibited extramarital sex between whites and all non-whites.<sup>4</sup> The issue of race was thus intimately tied to the daily experience of every individual in the country.

### **Jewish Socialists, Indian Comrades**

The whiteness of the Jewish population placed Jews in a more privileged position than other immigrant minorities, yet this status was not entirely secure (Stier 2004: 125). Jews first came to South Africa from Britain and Europe in the nineteenth century but a more substantial wave of immigration occurred between 1880 and 1930 (Shimoni 2003: 1). Over 80 per cent of these arrivals, like Podbrey and her family, were from Lithuania. The first census of the Union of South Africa in 1911 listed Jews in the category of whites and counted 46,919 Jews (3.7 per cent of the white population). By 1946, there were 104,156 Jews in South Africa (4.4 per cent of white population) (Shimoni 2003: 2). The precariousness of Jews in South Africa was expressed in the 1930 and 1937 bills that limited Jewish immigration (Shimoni 2003: 11). The pro-Nazi sentiments of many in the Afrikaner ruling party and the establishment of the Nazi-inspired *Greyshirts* movement gave public legitimacy to anti-Semitic rhetoric. It also produced “anxieties about Jewish racial status and belonging within the white power base” (Braude 2001: x).

Even in these circumstances, working class Jews were effective in early union work. At the turn of the century they created pioneering craft unions

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<sup>4</sup>Between 1950 and 1980 more than 11,500 people had been convicted under the Immorality Act (Blair 2003: 587).

that worked to unite all workers, “not excluding coloreds” (Shimoni 2003: 8). They were active in the labour movement and in radical socialist groups. Podbrey’s father, a lower middle-class bookkeeper, was a former member of the Jewish Workers Party, the *Bund*. In Durban he associated with other socialist Jewish immigrants. Although the CPSA in the early-1930s was in disarray, Podbrey’s father hosted like-minded friends to discuss politics. Young Podbrey eavesdropped on these debates, and was “converted,” in her phrase, to Communism (Podbrey 1993: 10).

Naidoo and his friend George Ponnen were the first recruits of Indian descent to join the CPSA in 1930. Naidoo was born in Durban in 1915 to a family of indentured labourers who came to work on sugar plantations in the Natal region. Between 1860 and 1911, a wave of workers had pursued this route. The labourers were offered the possibility of exchanging their return fare to India for land, and many, including Naidoo’s grandmother, did. Indian traders and professionals followed in the wake of the indentured workers until immigration was stopped in 1913. Indians formed communities in the Natal region, and by 1940, they constituted around two per cent of the general population of South Africa (Lloyd 1990: 514). Due to financial hardship, Naidoo was forced to leave school and contribute to the family budget. Naidoo began working in a clothing factory where he met Ponnen, with whom he would work intensively after joining the CPSA. Between 1936 and 1945, Ponnen and Naidoo helped establish 27 unions, including some of the largest in the country (*The Post* 2018). Naidoo was one of the founders of the *Natal Indian Youth League* and its secretary at the age of 18 (CP/CENT/PERS/03/04). He then founded the *Indian Youth Council* and was secretary and chairman of this body. In 1935 Naidoo became the Party Secretary in Durban. In 1937, he was elected a member of the central committee of the Party. In 1942, *The Guardian* reported that Naidoo was “recognised as one of the best Left-wing speakers in the country” (*The Guardian* 1942b). He joined the *South African Indian Congress* (SAIC), the major political movement organizing against segregation alongside the ANC and the CPSA.

Naidoo’s trade union work was inseparable from his activity in the Indian struggle for franchise and equality. Activists such as Naidoo and the eminent communist leader Dr Yusuf Dadoo were influenced by Gandhi’s ideas about peaceful resistance and by his legacy in South Africa. Their internationalism was shaped by the socialist and anti-colonialist

interpretations of nationalism of the time, and by the struggle against fascism (Raman 2005: 230). Their struggle for the franchise was embedded in “ideals of modern citizenship, freedom and equality,” and their belief in a future democratic, multiracial South Africa (Ibid.).

These ideals were frustrated during the 1940s, when the regime targeted urban residents of Indian descent with legislation that attacked their rights to land ownership and their entitlement to the franchise (Raman 2005: 230). In January 1944, Naidoo and other Indian and white South African activists visited the *United Nations Organization* (UNO) to protest the discrimination of South Africans of Indian descent (*The Guardian* 1944a). Reports of their meeting with politicians and famous black activists like the singer Paul Robson enraged the South African government. General Smuts claimed that they “do not deserve the name of South Africans; they ‘foul our nest’” (*The Guardian* 1944a). This did not deter Naidoo who in May that year, organized a march against residential segregation in Durban with the participation of 10,000 people (*The Guardian* 1944b).

Naidoo collaborated in the Passive Resistance campaign against the ‘Ghetto Act’ that designated residential areas according to race. The campaigners sought support from India, Britain and the United Nations. 2,000 individuals were arrested for their participation in demonstrations against the act between June 1946 and June 1948. Others faced imprisonment and organised boycott of Indian traders (*Passive Resister* 1947). The *Indian Congress* appointed Naidoo as an advisor to the Indian delegation at the UN where South Africa’s treatment of Indians came under attack (*Sechaba* 1971; Basner 1993: 185–89). The South African regime did not change its policies of segregation, and in 1948 accepted apartheid as its ruling principle.

### **Interracial Love and Political Protest**

These tense years of protest and labour struggles were the backdrop for Podbrey and Naidoo’s relationship. During this period, Podbrey became a professional labour organizer, and was appointed secretary of the Durban Branch of the Food and Canning Workers’ Union. She founded the African Commercial and Distribution Workers’ Union and presided as its secretary. She became a member of the Durban District Committee of the CPSA; and in July 1951 was appointed Secretary of the Cape Town branch. She also served as executive member of the Cape Town branch of the South African Trades and Labour Council, and served on the executive committee of the

Cape Town branch of the National Council of Women (CP/CENT/PERS/03/04).

Alongside their union work and the growing police surveillance, the couple had to cope with daily instances of racism and government banning of interracial association (Podbrey 1993: 94). Although in 1943 there was still no legal prohibition on their marriage, a local magistrate in Durban refused to marry a “pure” white and “pure” Indian which would “start the rot” of mixing races (Ibid.: 110). Finding a home in a segregated city was hard too. As a young girl who had grown up in a Jewish *Shtetl*, Podbrey was horrified by the prospect of living in a small flat in the Indian area. Podbrey notified Naidoo that she could not “sink into a ghetto existence,” referring both to her experience of life in the Pale of Settlement in Lithuania, and to the evolving campaign against the *Ghetto Act* (Ibid.: 87). When the couple’s plight grew more evident, CPSA leaders in Durban ordered them to relocate to Cape Town. As part of a concentrated effort to quell Naidoo’s political work, the police seized on the fact that he had not properly registered his residence in Cape Town, and forced him to return to Durban (CP/CENT/PERS/03/04). This put 1,600 kilometres between him, his family, his livelihood, and his political career. Naidoo’s mobility was further circumscribed when he was named a Communist in 1950 under the *Suppression of Communism Act*. When in 1951, Podbrey too was “named,” neither of the two could work effectively and their lives were in disarray.

In light of these circumstances, the CPSA instructed Naidoo and Podbrey to leave the country. The government declined the couple’s passport requests, and they were unable to purchase shipping or airplane tickets. Finally, Podbrey paid a group of seamen to hide Naidoo on their ship heading for England. In England, Naidoo was admitted but fined for the illegal voyage. Podbrey was also smuggled onto a ship bound for England where she was united with her children whom a friend had brought on-board.

### **The Communist Network: London**

The family was united at Southampton port in August 1951. On the train ride to London, Podbrey was surprised by the “miles upon miles of dreary, dank streets, wilting lines of washing and square, squat chimneys on top of peeling, shabby houses.” The city itself was “pockmarked with bullet holes, rubble everywhere and people who looked tired and careworn” (Podbrey 1993: 152). Unlike South African activists who arrived in England in later

decades, there was no established exile community to which they could turn for help. As Israel argues, the notion of exile was not in use among South Africans in the UK in the 1950s (Israel 1999: 141).

Nor was there an organized anti-apartheid movement that the couple could join. The first anti-apartheid gathering in London was a multiracial demonstration to boycott South African goods on 26 June 1959 (Gurney 2000: 123). From that meeting the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) was established in March 1960 (Lissoni 2008: 79). Support for the cause in the 1950s came from anti-colonial movements, Church groups, the CPGB and some individuals in the *Labour* and *Liberal* parties (Lissoni 2008: 86). As Lissoni writes, British organizations in the 1950s were concerned with "Africa as a whole," and the independence of the continent (Lissoni 2008: 45).

The individuals that would play central roles in the British AAM and the ANC mission in exile were mostly still in South Africa in 1951. The first prominent Communist, Vella Pillay, arrived in 1949. His house in London was a central node for the South African activist network (*Guardian* 2004). The radical priest Michael Scott returned to England in 1952 and established the Africa Bureau that sought to encourage opposition to colonialism by constitutional means but did not concentrate exclusively on South Africa (Lissoni 2008: 45). The prominent activist and later head of the AAM father Trevor Huddleston, returned to England in 1955 (Denniston 1999: 63). The *Defence and Aid Fund*, an early and major organ of support was established in 1956 (Herbstein 2005: 1). Oliver Tambo who would head the ANC in exile arrived in London in March 1960. Joe Slovo, communist and the main organizer of the armed resistance, and his wife Ruth First, communist journalist and activist, arrived in London in 1963 (Wieder 2013: 16). They had established a Communist cell in London during a visit in 1954 which consisted of three people. It grew in size and importance after 1960, and more substantially after 1966 (Lissoni 2008: 54).

Accounts of the global anti-apartheid movement typically begin with the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960 and its galvanizing effect on individuals and groups (Gurney 2000). In the absence of exile or activist networks in 1951 and because of their political affiliation, Naidoo and Podbrey turned to the CPGB. This is significant, highlighting the existence of an earlier communist transnational infrastructure that preceded the emergent anti-apartheid and solidarity organizations. South African

Communists were in regular contact with the CPGB, and informed the head office of Podbrey and Naidoo's arrival. The CPGB's publication the *Daily Worker* also ran a story about them (Podbrey 1993: 157). During a meeting with the CPGB representative Bob Stewart, the couple asked for help with housing, employment and schools. Stewart offered to solve all their concerns if they went to Hungary to work as broadcasters for the English section of *Radio Budapest*. Podbrey and Naidoo were filled with joy at the prospect of living and working in a socialist country:

To experience at first hand the struggles and achievements of building socialism, to share in the life of a people engaged in this historic task, to be part of their movement to create a workers' paradise. (Podbrey 1993: 156)

They expressed concern, however, about their lack of broadcasting experience. Stewart had assured them that they would be trained in Hungary. The main problem was getting them vetted by the Hungarian *Communist Party*. Stewart disclosed that the Party had rejected a number of previous recommendations, but added that the couple's credentials should prove satisfactory. Naidoo's experience as a journalist was an advantage. "You're the highest-ranking Party members we've put forward," Stewart commented (Podbrey 1993: 157). Stewart did not share the information that Leon Griffiths, the current head of the English broadcasting section in Budapest, was impatient to leave Hungary (Podbrey 1993: 160). Like Podbrey, Griffiths was a "hereditary Communist," his mother a founding member of the CP in Glasgow (*The Independent* 1992). Griffiths joined *Radio Budapest* as a dedicated Communist, but by 1951 he had become disillusioned. Griffiths was frustrated that his dispatches were mangled beyond recognition to fit the Stalinist line (*The Independent* 1992b). Unaware of these developments, Podbrey and Naidoo found themselves on their way to Hungary with their family by the end of the year following vetting by the *Communist Party* there.

### **Cold War Warriors: Budapest**

When the family arrived in Budapest in January 1952, Podbrey remembered, it seemed like "the ghost of the gay and romantic place it once was." The graceful buildings were "pockmarked with shell fire and mortar

fire, discoloured, not unlike London” (Podbrey 1993: 163). People looked nothing like the poster Soviets that Podbrey had expected to meet. Post-war Hungary had a Communist government and was economically and militarily allied with the Soviet Union (Feinberg 2017: xii). The Hungarian Prime Minister Mátyás Rákosi took pride in his loyalty to Stalin and initiated a purge in the party to prove it. From 1948, like other states in Eastern Europe, Hungary implemented economic policies such as centralized planning, the nationalization of industry, and the collectivization of agriculture. These profound changes displaced thousands, created economic strife and transformed society (Feinberg 2017: xiii). Foreign radio employees were exempt from these conditions and were housed in a building in Museum Utza. The Naidoo family lived in a large apartment on the second floor. They were allocated two comfortable rooms with their own bathroom and a housekeeper. They enjoyed a varied and plentiful diet, and their children were sent to good schools and nurseries (Podbrey 1993: 160). Their privilege extended to access to an adequately supplied and serviced Party hospital.

The privileges reserved for the journalists stemmed from the centrality of *Radio Budapest*, opened two years earlier, for the Soviet Union’s use of soft power in its battle against the West. It operated under the auspices of *Radio Moscow* and helped the Soviet regime “to establish and defend a set of general truths” which they were encouraged to disseminate “in a similar language and a similar set of practices” as *Radio Moscow* (Feinberg 2017: xii). Under Communist regimes, all cultural production was supervised by Moscow, but “none more so than radio, which was minutely censored and conceived as the mouthpiece of power” (Lovell 2015: 1). The English section reported to the head of the North American service, a woman whom Podbrey remembered as being “as diligent as any Catholic inquisitor in pouncing on a deviation from the official Party line or what she deemed to be so” (Podbrey 1993: 162). If a word or a sentence was disputed, it went to a higher-ranking comrade to “arbitrate on the finer linguistic and semantic meanings of words and phrases in 14 languages” (Podbrey 1993:162). When needed, arguments were settled by the Party secretary whom Podbrey likened to a “grey spider” who would emerge from her office to “admonish, castigate, punish ... for the good of the Party and therefore for the good of the entire working class, the people, the country, International Peace, and the Soviet Fatherland” (Ibid.).

Consequently, *Radio Budapest's* programs, like those of other Soviet stations in the Stalin era, were dreary. Broadcasters of *Radio Moscow* complained that it was impossible to remain "word-perfect and politically impeccable," and stay authentic and engaging (Lovell 2015: 169–71). Nonetheless, broadcasters in Budapest were instructed to study *Radio Moscow* closely. Each journalist was assigned five hours of listening, and it was compulsory to share detailed notes in their weekly meetings (Podbrey 1993: 182). *Radio Moscow* was a source for news and for the current Party line. If a communication came from TASS, the Russian news agency, about Stalin, it had to be broadcast verbatim, "with no deletions and no alterations; even commas and full stops were sacrosanct and it had to be the leading item" (Ibid.: 168). Visits were organized to factories, farms and parks for 'live' reporting. The visits were carefully choreographed to preserve the authority of the regime. Interviewees were handpicked, and their responses rehearsed. The reporters were accompanied by interpreters who doubled as Party supervisors, and all the interviews were pre-recorded. Although the trips were organized to depict the best of life under socialism, Podbrey remembered them as having the opposite effect: The journalists would inevitably "come face-to-face with peasants and workers who were resentful, angry, fearful" (Ibid.: 169).

Naidoo grew frustrated with this style of reporting. He informed his supervisors that the programs his team made were more interesting and professional programs. He recommended that his comrades listen to the BBC in their own language in order to observe a "successful and clever way to spread propaganda, while seeming to be impartial and objective" (Podbrey 1993: 183). This piece of advice must have irritated the heads of the station who were all too aware of the efforts on the part of the BBC *Empire Service*, *Radio Free Europe* (RFE) and *Voice of America* (VOA) to reach audiences in the Eastern Bloc. Local regimes tried unsuccessfully to block these transmissions but they remained central to the dissemination of ideas and information through the Iron Curtain (Feinberg 2017: xvii). From September 1947, the Soviet regime agreed to do the same through the creation of the *Communist Information Agency* (Cominform) (Ibid.: ix).

On 5 March 1953, the station's employees were summoned to a meeting where they were told of Stalin's death. Podbrey felt "thunderstruck," unable to imagine a world without Stalin. Despite her recent doubts, "Stalin still represented the rock around which our faith clung ... In losing him I'd lost



my youth, my childhood" (Podbrey 1993: 174). Podbrey was startled to note that she was the only person crying. Although Stalin's death would have a gradual thawing effect on broadcasting in Soviet Russia, it did not have an immediate impact on *Radio Budapest* (Ibid.: 171). It did, however, tear the Hungarian Party apart. The revelations about Stalinist crimes, and the admission that many of the Hungarian communists who had previously fled to the Soviet Union had been executed, caused anger. The anticipated reforms, however, were not implemented, and the Soviet grip did not loosen (Prazmowska 2014: 52). Infighting and popular anger intensified when Rákosi was reinstated as Prime Minister by the Soviets. This protest would mature at the October revolution of 1956. Although Podbrey and her family were not there to witness it, they were there for the trying years leading up to the protest.

Both Podbrey and Naidoo were likely to confront racism in Budapest, although they were reluctant to admit it. Children in the street would call after Naidoo, "'look, there's the black!'" and "drivers craned their necks to catch a sight of him" (Podbrey 1993: 188). Still, Podbrey believed these were curious rather than hostile reactions. Naidoo was rattled by an encounter with a group of Roma who pleaded with him to take them to South Africa to live with people like them. He asked Party officials if the Roma were discriminated against but they denied it. Colleagues, however, had whispered about the fate of the Roma and Podbrey felt disappointed by the betrayal of socialist dogma and its inability to change people and their prejudices. "There goes another article of faith, I thought" (Podbrey 1993: 189). Although some colleagues hid their Jewish identity, Podbrey refused to believe that anti-Semitism could exist in a socialist country (Robins 1997: 53).

As reporters, Podbrey and Naidoo were confronted with news fabrication, censorship and corruption. Their knowledge of this and the suffering they observed damaged their faith in Communism. In South Africa their political career had been motivated by their experience as marginalized minorities, targets of racial discrimination and of political prosecution. In Hungary they were members of the elite, employed in a highly regarded post. Because there was no room for dissent against Stalin during his life, or in the immediate years after his death (Feinberg 2017, xiii), they too were scrutinized and regulated by the state. The representatives from *Radio Budapest* and the official from the Hungarian CP who helped the couple

with their daily needs, were also secretly documenting their moves and conversations (Podbrey 1993: 160). Their freedom of movement, association, and their intellectual output were subordinated to the will of the Hungarian CP (Podbrey 1993: 162-4; 167).

### **Journeys of Dissent**

After three and a half years in Hungary, the mountain of disappointment grew too tall to ignore. Podbrey and Naidoo decided to return to England, much to the surprise of the CP representatives. Naidoo informed them that he would prefer to return with his family to South Africa than stay. He explained that, "at least there I have the possibility of opposing the system, of forming genuine trade unions, of resisting" (Podbrey 1993: 193). His answer reveals his disenchantment with socialism, and the deep sense of loss that accompanied his journey from a life of activism in South Africa to that of a state apparatchik in Budapest. Like other exiled political activists Naidoo was devastated by the loss of friends, family and a "strongly knit comradeship" (Bernstein 1994: xiii). Moreover, in South Africa his political work was a direct response to his experience as a man of Indian descent in a society with a rigid racial hierarchy. His interracial marriage highlighted the quotidian quality of racial segregation and increased the need for protest. In Hungary the urgency for political work dissolved.

In a documentary film made in 2000 about the couple, Podbrey summed up this sentiment,

"I left behind meaningful work in the trade unions, and political field. I left behind a circle of friends who were loyal and supportive and marvellous company. And a ]...[ fitting into a way of life that would never be repeated." (van Heerden 2000)

In addition to the trauma of exile, their time in Budapest left them bereft of their Communist faith, their identity, and the community built around their affiliation with and work for the Party. The depth of their loss crushed Naidoo. As Podbrey explained,

]... [ if he couldn't be a Communist anymore, it knocked the very basis out of his existence. And there was no alternative ... He didn't become an enthusiastic supporter of the capitalist system or American

imperialism. Life just ceased to hold up any promise or any hope. (van Heerden 2000)

Back in London, Naidoo did not re-join the Party. Podbrey felt compelled to share her experiences with comrades at the local CPGB branch. "They heard me out in silence, asked no questions and turned with relief to the next item on the agenda," she wrote in her memoir. She went to three more meetings and faced the same response. "So ended my attempts to educate from within and to spread the truth [...] They didn't want to know. They refused to know" (Podbrey 1993: 197). With old friends and fellow expatriates they contrived to talk of other things, "not always easy for political animals such as we." Only in October 1956 were people suddenly eager to hear of their Budapest experience. After the workers' committee took over the *Budapest Radio*, two emissaries invited Podbrey and Naidoo to return to Hungary and take charge of the English section. They were still debating the offer when the Russian tanks rolled into Budapest and crushed the revolution (Ibid.: 199).

Over the next decade, Naidoo sank slowly into depression. After a few years working as a journalist for the *Daily Worker*, Naidoo was fired and never had a salaried job again. Podbrey worked at a local college teaching shorthand and typing and provided for the family. Naidoo died in 1971, and he is buried in London, in Highgate Cemetery not far from the Karl Marx statue.

### **Conclusion**

Naidoo's life did not end on a triumphant note. Yet, restoring the bedrock of individual experience to view provides an alternative to mainstream political biographies that draw a neat and cohesive line of progression from oppression to victory. What the story of H.A. Naidoo and Pauline Podbrey does reveal is the contingency of activism, its many failures, and disillusionments.

Historian Jon Soske recently argued for the centrality of India and the Indian diaspora for South African politics, impacting black political thinkers and the shape that the anti-apartheid struggle took (Soske 2017:2). Soske locates the emergence of the African national struggle within the Indian Ocean space and points to Durban as a central node. This Indian Ocean port city formed Podbrey and Naidoo as individuals and as political actors. It

was here that they met—a setting that provided fertile ground for the growth of their radical politics. As members of the CPSA they were at the forefront of the establishment of an Africa-Indian alliance that defied the racial divisions made by the state. Their generation of struggle, Soske argues, “served as a crucial precedent for radical labour organizing in the 1950s and 1970s-1980s (Soske 2017: 81). As this paper has shown, Podbrey and Naidoo were central to the early transnational network based in shared ideals. When they were forced out, first of Durban, and then of South Africa, they utilized another transnational infrastructure – one deriving from Communism. Their journeys within and outside South Africa underpin the importance of various early transnational connections for the anti-apartheid struggle. From the evidence of the couple’s joint history, we gain a unique perspective on the material and intellectual infrastructures that preceded the formation of the global anti-apartheid movement.

Podbrey remarried after Naidoo’s death, and returned to Cape Town with her English husband in 1991. She passed away in 2009. A year later, her brother Maurice was asked to help run a sporting initiative in the Makhaza Township located in the vicinity of Cape Town. He accepted, but asked to register the resultant non-profit organization as the *Pauline Podbrey Foundation* to commemorate his sister. The gesture was accepted and *City Masters Sports Club* was formed (Podbrey 2017). Pauline Podbrey’s own journey of struggle and education finally came full circle.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel thematisiert die transnationalen kommunistischen Strukturen, die südafrikanische KommunistInnen Anfang der 1950er Jahre mit sozialistischen Regimen verbanden. Noch vor der Herausbildung einer globalen Anti-Apartheid-Bewegung im Gefolge des Sharpeville-Massakers 1960 ermöglichte dieses Netzwerk die Zirkulation von Menschen und Ideen aus Südafrika heraus. Kommunistische Bildungsarbeit und weitere Institutionen eröffneten politischen DissidentInnen Möglichkeiten für die Bildung von Gemeinschaften, Protest und Mobilität. Als der Staat die Verfolgung von KommunistInnen im Jahr 1948 intensivierte, konnte diese Infrastruktur genutzt werden, um eine Beschäftigung zu finden oder zu fliehen und das politische Engagement im Ausland fortzusetzen. Dies wird hier anhand der Reise der südafrikanischen KommunistInnen Pauline Podbrey und H.A. Naidoo gezeigt, die aufgrund ihrer politischen Aktivitäten gegen das Regime und der Apartheidgesetze, die „Mischehen“ wie die ihre verboten, 1951 gezwungen wurden, das Land zu verlassen. Von Großbritannien aus wurde das Paar von der britischen Kommunistischen Partei nach Ungarn geschickt, um im englischsprachigen internationalen Programm von *Radio Budapest* an den Auseinandersetzungen des Kalten Kriegs um die Herzen und Köpfe der Menschen teilzunehmen. Die Fallstudie belegt, wie die Überschneidung von politischem Aktivismus, Apartheid und „Rasse“ die Fluchtwege und Lebensverläufe kommunistischer Anti-Apartheid-AktivistInnen prägte. Die Rekonstruktion der Reiserouten des Paares und ihrer politischen Desillusionierung hinterfragt das nach der Apartheid verbreitete Narrativ vom politischen Kampf als heroischer Geschichte von Überleben und Triumph und hebt stattdessen die Fragmentierungen und Misserfolge eines politisch geführten Lebens hervor.